

## Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch Tazria-Metzorah 21 “Eye Change”

Gut Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom. First, I'd like to acknowledge that this week's sermon and kiddush are sponsored by Karen and Henrique Setton, in commemoration of the yahrtzeit of Ari ben Moshe v'Chaya z'l, father of Karen, father-in-law of Henrique, and grandfather of Maya and Liora Setton. May his memory be a blessing.

Compared with other parshiot, Tazria-Metzorah is generally considered by the rabbinate to be one of the most troublesome when presenting a d'var torah, primarily because the parsha describes what occurs when a person develops the skin disease known as *tzaraat*. More loosely translated, *tzaraat* means *spiritual or ritual leprosy*. In keeping with that meaning, the Gemara gives several reasons for *tzaraat*, based on spiritual transgressions such as *lashon hara*. However, even though our Sages provide a spiritual context instead of focusing on the physical disease of *tzaraat*, it is an obscure topic that, in most years, doesn't resonate with us.

But this year, after experiencing the effects of an entire year of the Covid virus, we can better relate to the concept of tzaraat, not necessarily because this pandemic has stemmed from spiritual failings, but because the virus is very contagious. Although tzaraat itself is not contagious, the Sages tell us that the spiritual causes **are** easily transmitted. When we think of it that way, the concept of tzaraat doesn't seem so arcane after all.

The Chidushei HaRim offers an intriguing commentary, in which he points out that the Torah refers to leprosy as an affliction, calling it *nega*. The pasuk tells us that an affliction will be considered tzaraat if, *hanega lo hafach et eyno, the affliction has not changed its appearance*. The Chidushei HaRim interprets these words to mean that the affliction did not change *et eino*, its letter "ayin", meaning if you move the last letter of the word affliction, *nega*, which is the letter *ayin*, to the front of the word, it becomes the word *oneg*. The letter *ayin* means *eye*, so we learn that if you put your eye, your outlook, on the right side, which is considered kabbalistically to be the good side, and you hold a positive view of people and situations, then you will have *oneg*, enjoyment. But if you look at everything from the other side, negatively, then you will feel only *nega*, affliction.

The gemarah in Mesechet Erchin says that one reason a person is afflicted with tzaraat is because they have *tzarat ayin*, a stingy, negative outlook. The pasuk therefore could be interpreted as saying *lo hafach et eino*, if the person did not change his perspective and still has a negative view of life, the tzaraat will be confirmed. A good eye, an “ayin tova” and an evil eye an “ayin ra’ah” depend strictly on a person’s outlook. Therefore, the Torah is teaching that someone who views life and people negatively will endure a life of *nega*, affliction, and those who have a positive outlook will be blessed with a life of *oneg*, pleasure.

I think that is one lesson of the Omer this year. As the Ramban points out, the days of the Omer were originally slated to be a kind of chol hamoed, a holiday between Pesach and Shavuot. However, these days eventually became a period of mourning because Rabbi Akiva’s students were disrespectful and focused on the negative in one other. We see that spiritual failings of Rabbi Akiva’s students, which centered on their “ayin”, their perspective about others, transformed a period of celebration into an entirely different experience, one of sadness and bereavement.

I think this is the message of our modern holidays and days of mourning during the Omer period as well: Yom HaShoah, Yom HaZikaron, Yom Ha'Atzmaut, and Yom Yerushalayim. We grieve for the Holocaust, yet we celebrate the State of Israel that emerged from the flames of the Holocaust. We mourn for the Israeli soldiers we lost, but the outcome of the wars they fought have also given us the cause for celebration. How can this be? I think the lesson of the modern Jewish calendar is that we must not stay mired in negative events. We must acknowledge and commemorate them, but we should also maintain a positive perspective on the future.

In this way, I believe the message of this week's parsha is fitting for Karen, Henrique Maya, Liora and their family as they observe the yahrtzeit of their beloved father. And I think the message is resonant during this period of transition when our vulnerability to Covid is subsiding. Although we've all experienced loss and nega, affliction, somehow, we need to find the strength within us to adopt a positive outlook. If we can accomplish this, God willing, we will merit to enter a happier time of oneg, of jubilant celebration. Shabbat shalom.